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Opening Statement From Senator Patty Murray at Subcommittee Hearing on Crumbling Infrastructure

(Washington, D.C.) – Today, U.S. Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) gave the following opening statement at the Senate Appropriations Transportation, Housing, and Urban Development (THUD) Subcommittee Hearing on Crumbling Infrastructure: Examining the Challenges of our Outdated and Overburdened Highways and Bridges:

"The Subcommittee will come to order.

"Today, we will hear testimony from three witnesses.

"Two from the Department of Transportation: Polly Trottenberg, the Undersecretary for Policy, and Victor Mendez, Administrator of the Federal Highway Administration.

"And our third witness is here from the Government Accountability Office: Phil Herr, Director of Physical Infrastructure Issues.

"I want to welcome all of our witnesses, and thank you for being here this morning. Each of these witnesses can speak to the importance of investing in our infrastructure.

"They know that these investments ensure our safety and the safety of our families.

"And they're well aware that investments in infrastructure are fundamental to improving our economy and increasing our economic competitiveness.

"Unfortunately, I know what happens when our infrastructure fails. Last month, in my home state, I saw firsthand the devastation caused when an entire section of Interstate 5 collapsed into the Skagit River.

"Unfortunately, this is the kind of disaster we can expect to happen more often when our roads and bridges fall into disrepair.

"And it should certainly be a wake-up call that we need to invest in repairing and rebuilding our aging roads, bridges, and highways.

"Thankfully no one was seriously injured in the Skagit bridge collapse, and work has already begun on a temporary and long-term repair.

"But the local economy, small businesses and the livelihoods of families are seriously disrupted without this critical artery being open for travel.

"In the United States, we have built an incredible transportation system.

- "Our highways, railroads and transit systems connect people across town and across the country."
- "They keep families together, connect workers to jobs, and create a productive environment for American businesses to grow over the long term.
- "But we cannot take our transportation infrastructure for granted. Like everything else, it does not last forever.
- "We need to reinvest in the infrastructure we have built by repairing the damage that has occurred over decades, replacing the infrastructure that is outdated and beyond repair, and expanding capacity where it is needed to support a growing population and economy.
- "Our families want assurances that the roads and bridges they drive on are safe, and our communities need a reliable infrastructure to thrive and grow.
- "For more than a generation, there was a bipartisan agreement on the need for smart infrastructure investment. But that bipartisan consensus seems to have eroded.
- "Recently, more and more lawmakers here in Washington, D.C., have focused on shrinking short-term budgets, regardless of the impact on jobs and economic growth.
- "This has led to attempts, too often successful, to choke off the investments today that could make a real difference down the line.
- "The fact is that if we slash our investments in infrastructure like roads and bridges, we aren't really saving money at all.
- "We are making things worse.
- "We are stifling economic growth, we are putting public safety at risk, and congestion is taxing families' time with painfully long commutes and causing health-threatening pollution.
- "Roads are going to need to be fixed eventually, bridges will need to be strengthened before they collapse, and waiting will only make the work more expensive and more difficult when we eventually do it.
- "And what will happen in the meantime?
- "When a bridge deteriorates, at some point it is no longer safe for heavier traffic such as emergency vehicles or large trucks. Eventually, it has to be closed to traffic altogether.
- "When roads fill with potholes it makes traffic worse and driving more dangerous."
- "So our families are less safe, our businesses can't move their goods as quickly, all because of short-term cuts.
- "It's shortsighted and it just doesn't make sense.
- "We have to remember that if we don't make investments now, we'll be stuck with a much bigger bill down the road.
- "The American Society of Civil Engineers recently released its latest Report card for America's Infrastructure, and our country got a D+.

- "More than 70,000 of our bridges across the country have been deemed 'structurally deficient,' and the average age of the typical American bridge is 42 years.
- "We're not keeping up with the repairs, and haven't for years, much less accounting for the growth of our country's population.
- "This is an area where you see agreement from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, major labor groups like the AFL-CIO, and economists and policy experts across the political spectrum.
- "They all recognize that investing in infrastructure creates jobs today, makes our families safer, and lays down a strong foundation for long-term economic growth.
- "We are going to be hearing more about the importance of transportation infrastructure investments from our witnesses.
- "But this is a clear case where investment cuts make our short-term budget deficit look better on paper, but cost us more in the long run, and make other deficits worse, in this case, our infrastructure deficit.
- "In the case of the Skagit bridge collapse, we were very lucky that the damage was not worse.
- "By the fall, Washington State expects to be finished with repairs, returning traffic to normal.
- "And I'm continuing to work with the Department to make sure we're reimbursing Washington State for eligible repairs.
- "But until then, commuters and families travelling on their vacations can expect to encounter delays when travelling that part of the interstate.
- "Local businesses continue to feel the impact of the bridge collapse, and businesses far and wide that rely on Interstate 5 to move goods will find it takes longer for their products to reach customers.
- "The collapse illustrates just how much we rely on our roads and bridges.
- "I look forward to hearing the perspective of our two witnesses today.
- "Based on their leadership and experience at the Department of Transportation, they can help us understand the current condition of our nation's infrastructure and how much additional investment it requires.
- "I hope to hear from them what these conditions mean for public safety and the economic competitiveness of our communities.
- "I am also interested in having a conversation about how recent policy changes will affect our investments.
- "MAP-21, the most recent highway authorization law, included new requirements for State departments of transportation to develop performance targets and put together plans to explain how they will reach those targets.
- "It also consolidated many of the highway programs, so that there is no longer a dedicated source of funding for bridge projects.
- "These policy changes were meant to improve investment decisions and grant States more flexibility. But when there are limited resources, as we experience today, how these decisions are actually made is critical.

"I want to hear about how DOT is implementing these new provisions, and how states are responding. I am particularly interested in understanding how States prioritize the projects they fund.

"This is especially important when you look at a bridge, where even if the likelihood of a failure is low, the result can be catastrophic.

"What tools are available to states to help them make these kinds of decisions?

"And I want to hear about how the Department of Transportation is managing its relationships with State and local governments.

"Our transportation system requires collaboration among all levels of government.

"It's a shared responsibility, one in which ensuring safety is everyone's top priority.

"I look forward to our discussion today.

"With that, I now turn it over to my partner, Senator Collins, for her opening statement."